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ABSTRACT

This report describes the range of methods used by state education agencies to report special education information to the public and the challenges related to this reporting. It begins by reviewing the reporting requirements under the No Child Left Behind Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and then reports the results of a survey of 34 state directors of special education that investigated the method and format used in the state to report information to the public. Results indicate: (1) the most common methods used for reporting data are general and special education reports. However, Web sites are increasingly being used by states to communicate information to the public; (2) information that is reported to the public is often presented to allow data from different groups of children to be viewed separately; (3) most states report on progress toward performance goals by combining the results of students with and without disabilities and reporting all student results together in general education reports; (4) 19 of the 34 states report information to the public about students who participate in assessments using accommodations and/or out-of-level testing. The report concludes by discussing the challenges that states face in public reporting of data. (CR)

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Special Education Data Reporting to the Public. Quick Turn Around (QTA)

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Quick Turn Around

Project FORUM

QTA – A brief analysis of a critical issue in special education

Special Education Data Reporting to the Public

August 2002

by Patrice Linehan and Joy Markowitz

Overview and Purpose

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, now titled the "No Child Left Behind Act" (NCLB), includes an increased emphasis on assessment and data reporting requirements. These issues will have a significant impact on data reporting under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the future. This *Quick Turn Around* (QTA) describes the range of methods used by state education agencies (SEAs) to report special education information to the public and the challenges related to this reporting. Project FORUM conducted this activity in response to inquiries on the topic, as part of its Cooperative Agreement with the US Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).[1]

Legislation

No Child Left Behind

As part of NCLB, beginning with the 2002-03 school year, states and school districts that receive Title I funding must prepare and disseminate concise annual report cards that are presented in a format that is uniform and understandable to parents. The NCLB Act requires at a minimum that the following is included in the annual State report card:

> *(i) information, in the aggregate, on student achievement at each proficiency level on the State academic assessments ... (disaggregated by race, ethnicity, gender, disability status, migrant status, English proficiency, and status as economically disadvantaged, except that such disaggregation shall not be required in a case in which the number of students in a category is insufficient to yield statistically reliable information or the results would reveal personally identifiable information about an individual student);*
>
> *(ii) information that provides a comparison between the actual achievement levels of each group of students described ... and the State's annual measurable objectives for each such group of students on each of the academic assessments required...;*
>
> *(iii) the percentage of students not tested (disaggregated by the same categories and subject to the same exception described in clause (i));*

[1] Project FORUM conferred with the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) and WESTAT during development of these data collection instruments to ensure that efforts were not duplicated.

(iv) the most recent 2-year trend in student achievement in each subject area, and for each grade level, for which assessments under this section are required;

(v) aggregate information on any other indicators used by the State to determine the adequate yearly progress of students in achieving State academic achievement standards;

(vi) graduation rates for secondary school students...;

(vii) information on the performance of local educational agencies in the State regarding making adequate yearly progress, including the number and names of each school identified for school improvement ...; and

(viii) the professional qualifications of teachers in the State, the percentage ... teaching with emergency or provisional credentials, and the percentage of classes in the State not taught by highly qualified teachers, in the aggregate and disaggregated by high-poverty compared to low-poverty schools...

[20 USC 6311 §1111(h)(1)(C)(i-viii)]

Although the more detailed report cards that SEAs are required to submit to Congress are not the direct responsibility of state directors of special education, it brings more prominence to the issue of public reporting of data. During the upcoming reauthorization of IDEA, the collection and reporting requirements in NCLB are likely to be examined closely.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

According to the regulations for Part B of the IDEA, SEAs already are required to report certain data to the public.

Performance goals and indicators.

The State must have on file with the Secretary information to demonstrate that the State—

(a) Has established goals for the performance of children with disabilities in the State that — ...

(2) Are consistent, to the maximum extent appropriate, with other goals and standards for all children established by the State;...

(b) Has established performance indicators that the State will use to assess progress toward achieving those goals that, at a minimum, address the performance of children with disabilities on assessments, drop-out rates, and graduation rates;

(c) Every two years, will report to the Secretary and the public on the progress of the State, and of children with disabilities in the State, toward meeting the goals established under paragraph (a) of this section; ...

[34 CFR §300.137]

Reports relating to assessments.

(a) General. In implementing the requirements...the SEA shall make available to the public, and report to the public with the same frequency and in the same detail as it reports on the assessment of nondisabled children, the following information:

(1) The number of children with disabilities participating—

(i) In regular assessments; and

(ii) In alternate assessments.

(2) The performance results of the children described in paragraph (a)(1) of this section if doing so would be statistically sound and would not result in the disclosure of performance results identifiable to individual children--

(i) On regular assessments (beginning not later than July 1, 1998); and

(ii) On alternate assessments (not later than July 1, 2000).

(b) Combined reports. Reports to the public under paragraph (a) of this section must include--

(1) Aggregated data that include the performance of children with disabilities together with all other children; and

(2) Disaggregated data on the performance of children with disabilities.

[34 CFR §300.139]

Annual report of children served--report requirement.

(a) The SEA shall report to the Secretary ... each year the number of children with disabilities aged 3 through 21 residing in the State who are receiving special education and related services...

[34 CFR §300.750]

Annual report of children served--information required in the report.

(c) Reports must also include the number of those children with disabilities aged 3 through 21 for each year of age ... within each disability category ..."

[34 CFR §300.751]

Although each state is responsible for reporting these data, the methods for doing so are left to the discretion of the SEA.

Project FORUM Survey

In order to gather information on *how* SEAs report special education data to the public, Project FORUM staff designed a survey consisting of two charts. The first listed various methods of reporting data (e.g., general education state reports, legislative reports, web site postings), and the second listed different formats for disaggregation (e.g., race/ethnicity, English as a Second Language/English Language Learner, local education agency). The survey respondent was asked to check the appropriate box(es) within each chart to indicate a response regarding the method and format used in the state to report information to the public. A final question requested information about the challenges SEA staff face in reporting such data.

The survey was sent to state directors of special education at the end of September 2001. Data collection continued until March 2002. Project FORUM received a total of 34 completed surveys. Highlights from these surveys are summarized in the following pages.

Survey Findings

Methods Used for Reporting

According to Project FORUM's survey findings, the most common methods used for reporting data are general and special education reports. Website postings are also popular and are

increasingly being used by states as a tool to communicate information to the public, especially regarding reports on assessment results. In 12 of the 34 responding states, these websites include searchable databases on **all** students' performance and, to a lesser degree, searchable assessment data are available separately on students with disabilities and students without disabilities. Searchable database fields vary by school, district and SEA division/unit), sometimes making it difficult to combine or compare data for reporting to the public. Select examples of the methods used by SEAs to report information can be found in Table 1.

In addition to general education, special education and website reports, Project FORUM's survey asked SEAs whether information is reported to the public in legislative reports or special packets sent to the press. Less than one-third of responding states report assessment results of all students (in the aggregate) using legislative reports and special press packets (12 and 11 states, respectively). Even fewer states report assessment results for students with disabilities specifically through legislative reports (8 of 34 states) or press packets (7 of 34 states).

Table 1
State Reporting Methods Using Examples of Data Categories[2]

Type of Data	Reporting Method (number of states)					
	General Education Reports	Special Education Reports	Legislative Reports	Special Press Packets	Website Posting	Searchable Database on Website
Assessment Results*	30	12	12	11	26	12
Dropout Rates*	30	7	7	2	18	8
Graduation Rates*	24	7	8	2	18	9
Number of Students by Disability Category	8	27	8	3	13	4
Number of Students with Disabilities by Educational Placement	4	28	9	2	10	7
Personnel (e.g., teachers employed, vacant positions)	11	28	9	2	10	7

* All students with and without disabilities reported in aggregate.

Public Reporting of Disaggregated Data

Information that is reported to the public is often presented to allow data from different groups of children to be viewed separately. Project FORUM's survey responses indicate that SEAs present disaggregated data by race/ethnicity more than other student characteristics (e.g., low-income, English as a Second Language/English Language Learner), and by local education agency (LEA) more than other system characteristics (e.g., school, schools with similar

[2] Survey recipients were asked to check all reporting methods that applied to their state and to describe any additional types of data reported. However, due to the nature of the survey question, it is not possible to discern if a state uses a particular reporting method for data not listed on the survey, particularly general education data. Due to multiple responses to items, totals do not equal 34, which is the number of surveys collected by Project FORUM.

characteristics).[3] When reporting student assessment results, for example, 25 of 34 SEAs break the information down by race/ethnicity and 26 of 34 by LEA. In fact, assessment performance is one area in which reported data are broken down in multiple ways.

State data is often reported separately for each LEA (i.e., disaggregated by LEA). This is not surprising since data is often collected or examined by school district. Also, data disaggregated by race/ethnicity is prevalant among survey respondents, especially in the areas of student performance on assessments, dropout, disability and educational placement. While some responding states have additional formats for disaggregation beyond those listed in the FORUM survey,[4] most of the state formats for disaggregation are consistent with federal requirements. For example, reporting of student achievement or progress data is required by both NCLB and IDEA legislation and thus can frequently be found in both general *and* special education reports to the public. However, certain personnel or disability-specific information (e.g., number of students by disability or educational placement) typically is found only in special education reports (See Table 1). A few states noted that they will soon be reporting by student gender, migrant status and/or 504 status.

By far, the most common types of data reported to the public relate to student progress, which includes assessment results, dropout rates and graduation rates. And of these three, states report assessment results more frequently.

Reporting on Progress Toward Performance Goals

According to Project FORUM's survey findings, most states report on progress toward performance goals by combining the results of students with and without disabilities and reporting all student results together in general education reports. Information on aggregated reporting is summarized in Table 1.

Aggregated Reporting

In 30 of the 34 responding states, assessment results and dropout rates for *all* students are published in general education state reports. Fewer states (24 of 34) report graduation rates in this fashion. Some states report data on *all* students together within special education reports. Of the 34 responding states, seven report dropout and graduation rates for students with disabilities together with their nondisabled peers and 12 report assessment performance this way. See Table 1.

[3] Since SEAs are required to disaggregate certain data (e.g., students removed to an interim alternative educational setting by race, ethnicity and disability category), there are likely to be additional data available at the SEA level that were not covered as part of this brief document.

[4] The additional areas of disaggregation are: comparable district; suspension and expulsion; free/reduced lunch; and disproportionality in special education identification, placement and specific disability. Some survey respondents were careful to differentiate between the use of "Title I" and "free/reduced lunch" as income factor categories for disaggregation and at least one state uses both these categories for public reporting purposes.

Disaggregated Reporting

Special education reports seem to target a more specific audience of those interested mainly in students with disabilities. Twenty states report the assessment results of students with disabilities in their special education specific reports. Eleven states report separate assessment data on students without disabilities in their special education reports, which allows data comparisons to be made without having to reference separate reports.

The dropout and graduation rates for students with disabilities are also more likely to appear in separate special education reports, rather than being accompanied by the same data on students without disabilities (21 of 34 responding states). Eight report dropout and graduation rates for students with disabilities separately in general education state reports. Table 2 summarizes the disaggregated data for students with and without disabilities that are available through the top three methods used to report student progress in states.

Table 2
Number of States Reporting Data for Students with and without Disablities Separately

Reporting Method	Assessment Results		Dropout Rate		Graduation Rate	
	Students with Disabilities	Students without Disabilities	Students with Disabilities	Students without Disabilities	Students with Disabilities	Students without Disabilities
General Education Reports	24	25	8	14	8	11
Special Education Reports	20	11	21	7	21	6
Website Postings	23	18	10	6	13	7

Methods Used for Reporting Assessment Data

Data on the number of students with disabilities participating in state assessments, as well as data on the results of those assessments, are both likely to be disaggregated for reporting in a variety of ways.

Assessment Participation

The number of students with disabilities participating in regular assessments is almost as likely to be found in general education reports as special education reports (25 versus 24 states, respectively). However, alternate assessment participation data are not as readily available and are more likely to appear in special education specific reports than in general education reports (23 versus 17 states, respectively). The number of students with disabilities participating in regular assessments is more than twice as likely to appear on SEA websites than the number of those participating in alternate assessments (18 versus 8 states). Two states do not report participation rates to the public regarding regular assessment and nine states do not report on alternate assessment. This information is summarized in Table 3.

Assessment Results

All of the 34 responding states report student assessment results in some way. Many states rely on multiple methods to report this information. For example, using website postings, while also distributing both general education and legislative reports. Two report only through use of their state websites, and one state reports only information pertaining to students without disabilities through a general education report. The results of all students who participate in state assessments are generally reported aggregated within general education reports (see Table 1), while special education reports tend to focus more exclusively on the results of students with disabilities (see Table 2). According to responding SEAs, 24 of 34 states report assessment results of students with disabilities, and 25 of 34 states report assessment results of students without disabilities in separate reports or separate sections of the same reports (see Table 2). Alternate assessment results are reported more often in special education reports than general education reports. It is unclear from Project FORUM's survey if alternate assessment results are combined with regular assessment results for reporting purposes (Thompson & Thurlow, 2001).[5]

Table 3
Number of States Reporting Assessment Participation for Students with Disabilities

Method	Assessment Participation	
	Regular Assessments	Alternate Assessments
General Education Reports	25	17
Special Education Reports	24	23
Website Postings	18	8

Assessment Accommodations and Out-of-Level Testing

Federal statute requires that students with disabilities be included in all state and district-wide assessments, or participate in an alternate assessment as appropriate. [20 USC §1412 (a)(17)(A)] The individualized education program (IEP) team determines whether a student participates in the regular assessment with or without accommodations, or participates in the alternate assessment using state or district guidelines.

Nineteen of the responding 34 states report information to the public about students who participate in assessments using accommodations and/or out-of-level testing. Seventeen report on students participating with accommodations and seven on out-of-level testing using one or more reporting method. Some states use *non-approved* or *non-standard* test accommodations and report on this use; however, each state defines these terms differently and three of the responding states noted they do not permit non-approved/non-standard accommodations. Out-of-level testing is not permitted in at least six states, according to comments written on returned surveys.

Test participation with accommodations is reported in general education reports more often than in special education specific reports (14 versus 10 states) or on state websites (4 states), although

[5] According to a report by the National Center on Educational Outcomes, most states that have scoring systems in place for alternate assessments report scores separately from those of general assessment participants (Thompson & Thurlow, 2001).

most (15 of those reporting) use more than one method of reporting. Out-of-level test participation is reported more often in special education reports than general education reports (5 versus 3 states). See Table 4.

Table 4
Number of States Reporting Student Assessment Participation in Various Ways

Method	Accommodations	Out-of-level Testing
General Education Reports	14	3
Special Education Reports	10	5
Website Postings	4	2

Annual Report of Children Served

To receive IDEA funds, each SEA must submit an annual report to the federal government on the number of children with disabilities, ages 3-21, who live in the state and receive special education and related services. [34 CFR §§300.750-754] Although these data are compiled by OSEP in its Annual Report to Congress,[6] it is not required that this information be reported by states to the general public. Since the data are usually collected and stored by the special education division of the SEA, it is not surprising that this type of data typically appear in special education reports (27 of 34), rather than in general education ones (8 of 34). Additionally, special education reports contain information on the educational environment in which students with disabilities are served. Twenty-eight of the 34 SEAs that responded to the survey publish data on education environment in special education reports compared to the much lower rate of reporting (four states) through general education reports. This information is summarized in Table 5.

Table 5
Number of States Reporting Students by Disability Category and Educational Placement

Method	Number of Students by Disability Category	Number of Students by Education Environment
General Education Reports	8	4
Special Education Reports	27	28
Website Postings	13	10

While assessment data are most widely reported and a variety of methods used, other data are more commonly directed at specialized audiences. Data on personnel, educational placement and disability category are most often reported to the public only through special education reports (28, 28 and 27 states, respectively). Legislative reports, special press packets and reports to various state groups (e.g., parent advisory panels, state board) are less common (fewer than 10 responding states), but much SEA staff time and other resources are spent responding to data inquiries from legislators, groups, organizations and interested individuals.

[6] http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/OSEP/Products/OSEP2001AnlRpt/

Challenges to Public Reporting of Data

There is much work being done in states related to data collection and reporting. States are at various stages of development in these areas. Many data systems are new or near completion and some problems still need to be resolved. To ensure the accuracy of data reported publicly, SEAs suggested that the following issues be addressed: incompatible or limited data systems; accuracy of data; diversity of data needs; and accessibility of data.

Incompatible or limited data systems

About one-third of those responding to Project FORUM's survey mentioned some problems related to the "silo" approach to data management. SEAs stated that they face challenges with incompatible or limited data systems among their own divisions, which makes meaningful reporting difficult. Some states do not have individual student record systems, which limits the type of data queries that can be done. Definitions of terms and periods of data reporting may differ from one division to the next, making data incompatible for reporting purposes. In some cases, states collect similar information, but use different methods or formats (e.g., data reported in number of students rather than percentages).

Accuracy of data

Many SEA respondents questioned the accuracy of local data being reported to the state. Due to a lack of resources at the local level, including time and staffing problems, consistency among LEAs is lacking. Many of the same standardization challenges that exist between SEA divisions can be found at the local level as well. The level of technical skill needed to use advancing technology and to manipulate increasingly complex data sets requires additional positions and professional development at both the SEA and LEA levels. Thus, data reporting to the public may be viewed as one more responsibility taxing an already overburdened system.

Diversity of data needs

Additionally, consideration must be given to the unique features of the state, such as geography. Comparing very different LEAs can pose problems in reporting. One state, with many rural areas, reported that a "special education unit" could be one or several school districts. With small numbers of students in groups (e.g., disability classifications), careful attention must be paid not to breach confidentiality. SEAs must be given a certain amount of discretion to handle their distinctive needs.

Accessibility of data

While it may be desirable to have a central location for all data, this approach presents its own challenges. Many state respondents noted that data are often controlled outside of the special education division, whether in a central location or another division, and are not easily accessible. Sometimes departments have different approaches to issues (e.g., assessment accommodations and out-of-level testing) or "turf" issues arise over sharing information. This can make the job of reporting data to the public more time-consuming and complicated. In order to remove the barriers to public reporting, integration of underlying philosophical differences may be just as important as the integration of the data itself.

SEA Strategies to Overcome Challenges

To assist LEAs in collecting and reporting data for public dissemination, at least two states provide technical assistance to the LEA special education personnel who manage data. Also, efforts have been made to develop "user friendly" data systems. Such systems must combine effective technical integration with support from information technology staff, in order to eliminate some of the challenges SEAs face when reporting to the public. SEA staff noted the importance of districts using the same methods for collecting, managing, disaggregating and reporting data, thus making it easier to report data to the public that can be used for comparison purposes. This necessitates the involvement of all appropriate divisions and staff at the initial planning stages and throughout the data collection and management process.

Final Remarks and Other Considerations

When a type of data collection and data reporting is mandated by federal legislation, those data are more likely to be widely disseminated to the public using a variety of methods than other non-mandated data. Overall, assessment results of students with and without disabilities are combined in general education reports and are available to a lesser degree in reports tailored to specific audiences, such as the press, legislators, or those accessing information through searchable websites.

Based on a companion report to Education Week's 1999 Quality Counts Report titled *Reporting: What the Public Wants to Know*, the public wants states to make student performance prominent in its reports. However, citizens want information beyond test scores, such as data about safety and teacher qualifications (A-Plus Communications, 1999).

It is important to understand that various audiences often value and rank educational indicators differently. For example, educators and the public may disagree on what information should be reported. While they tend to agree when ranking accountability indicators, parents and other taxpayers stressed the importance of performance indicators over other information, such as student demographics and per-pupil spending, which rank high among educators (A-Plus Communications, 1999).

In general, the public cautions SEAs about overdoing demographic data, which is often seen as "an excuse for low performance or as an inappropriate label ..." (A-Plus Communications, 1999, p. 5). Yet, different communities often vary in their opinions about education reporting. Most agree that comparing schools and students to each other and to fixed standards is important. However, they have different ideas about whether schools should be compared only to those with similar characteristics. Focus group research indicates that educators and some community groups favored such comparative grouping. But small groups of parents and taxpayers opposed the idea because they felt students needed the same level of skill proficiency as others in the nation and should not be compared in this limited way (A-Plus Communications, 1999).

Furthermore, the SEA cannot assume that a majority of citizens has seen its reports. In fact, according to a Public Agenda poll, only 31 percent of parents and 52 percent of teachers confirmed that they had seen an accountability report (Olsen, 1999). According to the poll results, all public reports should be short, attractive, and easy to identify and read. Reports

should be available in a wide range of locations, including schools, public meetings, libraries and through direct mailings. In some cases it may be necessary to help people understand how to use the information presented, and short summary data reports should direct interested readers to more detailed information.

Finally, there is limited research available on the most effective methods to inform the public on education issues. Also, research findings cited earlier suggest that what education leaders and policymakers want to tell the public is not always what the public wants to know. Policymakers have many issues and audiences to consider when making decisions on public reporting; therefore, it may be helpful to know how other states are tackling these challenges.

During the reauthorization process there are likely to be discussions regarding how to align IDEA data requirements with data requirements in other legislation. Project FORUM intends for this document to inform those discussions by providing policymakers with information about current state activities related to public data reporting.

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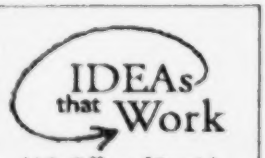

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